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## **Buddhism and Education: The Phor Tay's Experience**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The Phor Tay family consists of four schools, namely Bodhi Kindergarten, Bodhi Primary School, Bodhi National Type Secondary School and Bodhi Private High School. Its origin was the Bodhi Free School which was founded in 1940 by the Phor Tay Institution. In 1946 the free school was replaced by the Bodhi Primary School which also contained a preschool class. In the year of 1952, the Bodhi High School was formed to enable the primary school graduates to continue their education in a Buddhist secondary school. After the independence of the Federation of Malaya in 1957, Bodhi Primary School accepted the offer from the new Malayan government to convert into a national type school and split into the Bodhi National Type Primary School and the Bodhi Kindergarten which remained as a private organisation. In 1962 Bodhi High School accepted the

same offer and split into the Bodhi National Type Secondary School and the Bodhi Private High School.

The Phor Tay Institution was founded in 1935 by a young bhikkhuni named Fang Lian from Xiamen, China. Her three main purposes for setting up the Phor Tay Institution were stated as Propagating the Buddhadharma, Helping the orphans and Promoting the Buddhist education. The school logo of the Phor Tay schools is also designed as a junk symbolising the path of the Bodhisattva seeking complete enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings. The most important role of the Phor Tay family is therefore to propagate the teaching of the Buddha in the system of education besides performing other similar roles just like other non-Buddhists schools. At present, the Phor Tay Institution has practically stopped functioning as a home for orphans, the question is: Do all the Bodhi schools still remain as Buddhist schools propagating the Buddhadharma, or have already turned into some secular schools with some remaining superficial Buddhist characteristics?

## **The Origin**

Phor Tay is the Hokkien term for bodhi. In Mandarin, it is written as 菩提 “Pu Ti”.

In 1930 Venerable Fang Lian (芳莲) travelled from Xiamen, China to Penang to propagate the Buddhadharma. In 1935, with the help of her disciples and followers, she established the Phor Tay Institution (菩提学院). Her three main purposes of setting up this institution were: Propagating the Buddhadharma, Helping the orphans and Promoting the Buddhist education. Unfortunately her health was extremely bad and she passed away two years later without realising her vows. However her unselfish deeds and great vows had already touched the hearts of many Buddhists and in 1940 the Phor Tay Free School was established to provide free afternoon classes for those who wanted to learn and be educated irrespective of their age. In late 1941 the Pacific War broke out in Asia and the free school was forced to close down. In 1945 after the war, the free school quickly resumed its operation and there was great joy of celebrating world peace, followed by keen enthusiasm to reform the school. It reached an unanimous decision to alter the afternoon school to a standard primary school with a well defined syllabus and proper academic system. In 1946 the Phor Tay Primary School was formed with six classes starting from standard one to standard six and also a preschool class. The primary school started its first school year in a rented bungalow along Burma Road. In December 1949 it moved into its new building which was built along Bagan Jermal Road. In 1952 Phor Tay Secondary School was formed to enable the primary school leavers to continue their lower secondary education in a Buddhist school. Without their own building, the secondary

school was sharing classrooms with the primary school. In 1953 six new classrooms were built behind the primary school building for the secondary school students to use. In 1957 when Malaya declared her independence, the secondary school building committee was also formed to plan for a new school building to be built beside the primary school. This new building was finally completed in 1960 and the secondary school also proudly started its first upper secondary class in the same year. Phor Tay Institution had thus completed the establishment of its full range of schools from preschool level to upper secondary level.

In 1958 the primary school accepted the offer from the Malayan government and converted itself into a national type school which would receive monthly subsidy from the government. The preschool classes therefore had to be excluded from the primary school and became a separate independent organisation of its own. In 1962 the secondary school also accepted similar offer from the government and split into Phor Tay National Type Secondary School and Phor Tay Private High School. The national type secondary school was formed by the lower secondary classes, the upper secondary science and art classes of the original school. The upper secondary commerce class however retained its independent status and became the Phor Tay Private High School. The national type secondary school and the private high school though operated as two separate schools were still housed in the same building and shared classrooms and other facilities. Later a new block solely for the use of the private high school was built in the school compound to make the two schools physically more distinctive. In 2009 the Board of Directors decided to move the national type secondary school out from the old school building and shift it to Sungai Dua.

## **The Founder**

Venerable Fang Lian was born in 1901 in Xiamen, China. When she was still a young girl, she often followed her parents to the Lam Pho To Temple (南普陀寺) to listen to dharma talks given by prominent monks. Among these prominent monks were Venerable Tai Xu (太虚大师) and Venerable Yuan Ying (圆瑛法师). When young Fang Lian reached the age of sixteen, her father passed away suddenly leaving her in great grief. She then decided to leave home and go to study the Dharma under the tutelage of Venerable Dao Jie (道阶法师). Ever since 1907, her master, Venerable Dao Jie had been travelling to South Asia and India to preach Mahayana Buddhism and often pay friendly visits to Buddhist temples and organisations belonging to different traditions. When he was in Malaya, he stayed at Kwan Inn Teng Temple in Kuala Lumpur and travelled around Malaya and Singapore to preach Mahayana Buddhism. Finally he settled down at Sam Poh Tong Temple (三宝洞) in Ipoh and died there at the age of sixty five in 1934.

When Venerable Fang Lian turned twenty nine in the year of 1930, she bravely followed her master's footsteps to travel to South East Asia to preach the Buddhadharma. In Medan, Indonesia she met and converted one of her first batch of disciples Chen Kuan Zong (陈宽宗) who later became the second abbot of Phor Tay Institution. Venerable Fang Lian was actively converting young ladies to become Buddhists while promoting Mahayana Buddhism. These ladies later played an important role in helping her to establish the Phor Tay Institution in Penang.

Phor Tay Institution was established by Venerable Fang Lian in 1935. According to written record, she stated three main purposes for establishing this Buddhist institution. The first one was to propagate the Buddhadharma and train Dharma preachers. Second purpose was to provide a home for orphans and social charity services to the public. The third one was to actively engage in Buddhist education. Looking at her first and third purposes, it is very clear that why she did not name her monastery as a temple or vihara but an institution.

The Phor Tay Institution was built on a piece of land with an area of three acres along Bagan Jermal Road. The piece of land was bought by her followers and given to her to establish her monastery. There were three old huts that came with the land and they were renovated into a small temple, a nunnery and a kitchen-cum-dining hall. The Phor Tay Institution quickly became the place where women, young and old, gathered to study and practice Mahayana Buddhism. Unfortunately, a few years later, Venerable Fang Lian died at the age of thirty five because of her poor health. On her deathbed, she instructed her disciples to continue to realise her vows of helping the orphans and setting up a Buddhist school. The bodhi seed of Phor Tay schools was thus sowed.

## **The Second Abbot**

After the death of Venerable Fang Lian, Chen Kuan Zong (陈宽宗) became the abbot of Phor Tay Institution. For twenty years, she remained as the abbot starting from 1938 to 1957. It was during her time, the orphanage, kindergarten, primary school and secondary schools were established.

When venerable Fang Lian passed away in 1937, Chen Kuan Zong, Wu Kuan Ding (吴宽定) and Chen Ci Hua (陈慈华) bravely took up the responsibility to maintain and develop the Phor Tay Institution. All three of them were then not ordained nuns but young ladies who vowed not to get married and stay vegetarian for their whole life. To promote Buddhism, Chen Kuan Zong invited Venerable Yan Ben (演本法师) to give Dharma talks at Phor Tay Institution starting from 1939. The next year Venerable Ci Hang (慈航法师) was also invited. These two prominent monks were so popular and their Dharma talks were able to attract a lot of people including many intellectuals to

come to Phor Tay Institution to learn the Dharma. Because of that, a quarter for male disciples and another for monks were built within the compound of Phor Tay Institution. Venerable Ci Hang who stayed there for three long years diligently gave Dharma talks that benefited many people. In 1940, to realise her master's last words, Chen Kuan Zong also started to accept orphan girls to stay in Phor Tay Institution and in the same year she established an afternoon free school there too.

Phor Tay afternoon free school is considered as the beginning of the Phor Tay schools. The year 1940 is also declared as the birth year of all four Phor Tay schools. When the free school was started, most of the volunteer teachers were recruited from the Penang Hokkien Girls School (檳城福建女校) nearby. Among them were Wang Nong Shu (王弄书), Chen Shao Ying (陈少英) and Bi Jun Hui (毕俊辉).

## **The Volunteer Teachers**

Wang Nong Shu was born in 1896 in Hokkien Province of China. When she graduated as a teacher, she bravely left China to teach in Indonesia and later in Burma. The reason for her to move to Burma was to go there to study Buddhism. In 1927 she was converted to a Buddhist by Venerable Ci Hang who was then preaching Mahayana Buddhism in Rangoon. Wang Nong Shu thus became a disciple of Venerable Ci Hang and was praised by her master as a very diligent learner of the Buddhadharma. In 1933 when Venerable Ci Hang established the Chinese Buddhist Association in Rangoon, Wang Nong Shu was elected as one of the committee members. She was also appointed as the head of the Buddhist free school set up by the association. It was in 1933 Wang Nong Shu became acquainted with Venerable Fang Lian when the venerable came to visit the Chinese Buddhist Association. In 1938 Wang Nong Shu left Burma to come to teach in Penang Hokkien Girls School upon the invitation of the school principal. When she was in Penang, to her surprise she found out that Venerable Fang Lian had already passed away. However, this sad news did not stop her from lending a helping hand to the new abbot of Phor Tay Institution to realise the vows of Venerable Fang Lian.

When Phor Tay Afternoon Free School started its operation in 1940, Wang Nong Shu not only played the role of a volunteer teacher herself but also invited many of her colleagues to come and join her to teach there after school. The free school was extremely popular in its first year and the number of people who came to register the following year was more than what they could possibly handle. The Phor Tay members were overwhelmed by the joy of success and started to plan to extend the building of Phor Tay Institution to accommodate the increasing number of students. However the Pacific War broke out in Asia in December 1941 and almost everything came to a

sudden halt.

During the war the free school stopped its operation and Phor Tay Institution became a shelter not only for the monks, nuns and the orphans, but also for some of the volunteer teachers. Among them were Chen Shao Ying and Bi Jun Hui. During their stay there, they spent most of their time studying Buddhism and listening to the Dharma talks given by Venerable Ci Hang who was also taking shelter there. Venerable Ci Hang requested Chen Shao Ying and Bi Jun Hui to continue to stay in Phor Tay Institution even after the war had ended to help promoting Buddhist education there. He also asked Venerable Kuan Zong to go and look for Wang Nong Shu after the war and invite her to come back to Phor Tay to work. Later Venerable Ci Hang himself had to move to Singapore to hide from the Japanese soldiers after they started to suspect that he was helping the Chinese to fight against them.

After the war, under the leadership of Venerable Yan Ben, the free school quickly resumed its operation to provide free education to the public. The response from the people was very encouraging and the Phor Tay members decided to convert the free school into a proper primary school. In 1946 through the effort of Wang Nong Shu, Chen Shao Ying and others, the Bodhi Primary School was successfully registered as a subsidiary of the Phor Tay Institution. After its registration, the primary school immediately started its operation in a rented bungalow along Burma Road. Chen Shao Ying was appointed as the first headmaster of the school. In the same year, the Singaporean tycoon Mr. Hu Wen Hu (胡文虎) who was then travelling from Singapore to Burma, stopped by Penang and learnt about the Phor Tay Institution and its primary school. He was deeply touched by the enthusiasm, dedication and commitment of the Phor Tay members to promote Buddhist education, and therefore generously donated a big sum of three hundred thousand Malayan dollars to build the Phor Tay complex which would consist of a primary school, an orphanage and a main shrine hall. The new complex was eventually completed in December 1949, proudly standing along Bagan Jermal Road up to now.

## **The Dharma Masters**

The first dharma master who was invited to preach in Phor Tay Institution was Venerable Yan Ben. Subsequently Venerable Kuan Zong also invited Venerable Ci Hang, Venerable Fa Fang (法舫法師) and Venerable Zhu Mo (竺摩法師) to play the important role of Dharma master at Phor Tay.

Venerable Yan Ben and Venerable Ci Hang being the pioneers serving at Phor Tay Institution had played a very important role of training up the Phor Tay members and influencing them to embrace Buddhism so tightly that they worked selflessly to propagate the Buddhadharma as the most

important thing in their life. Venerable Kuan Zong, Wang Nong Shu and Chen Shao Ying had truly devoted their whole life to Phor Tay to promote Buddhist education in Penang.

In 1937 Venerable Fa Fang was instructed by his master Venerable Tai Xu (太虛大師) to come to South Asia and India to preach Mahayana Buddhism. When he was preaching in Phor Tay Institution, he encouraged the members to progress to set up the Buddhist secondary school and not stop at the primary level. According to him, at the primary school level, only the dharma seeds are sowed in the hearts of the children, but at the secondary school level, the dharma seeds would germinate and flourish. Only at the secondary school level, the students would truly learn and understand the Buddhadharma and therefore be able to continue to propagate the true teaching of the Buddha to benefit the world. His inspiring words immediately stirred up the passion and the enthusiasm of the Phor Tay members. When Venerable Fa Fang was leaving Penang, Venerable Kuan Zong asked him whether he would come back to stay in Phor Tay permanently as the Dharma master if the Phor Tay secondary school was established. His spontaneous answer of “Yes” further strengthened the commitment and confidence of the Phor Tay members. In 1951, Phor Tay Secondary School was successfully registered and ready to start its operation the following year, however Venerable Fa Fang also suddenly passed away in Ceylon in October the same year. Having lost Venerable Fa Fang, Phor Tay Institution had to look for a replacement to fill up the important position of Dharma master. The replacement was later confirmed to be Venerable Zhu Mo from Hong Kong who was actually recommended by Venerable Fa Fang himself when he was still alive. Venerable Zhu Mo arrived at Penang on the fourth of May 1954. Beside being the Dharma master of Phor Tay Institution, he was also assigned to teach Buddhism at the secondary school. At that time, Phor Tay Secondary School had already entered its second academic year. Six classrooms were also built specially to accommodate the secondary students. The first thing Venerable Zhu Mo engaged to do was to compile a new text book on Buddhism suitable for the lower secondary school level. Wang Nong Shu was appointed as the first headmaster of Phor Tay Secondary School. When she retired in 1958, she was succeeded by Fu Qin Xi (傅晴曦) recommended by Wang Nong Shu herself.

## **Propagation of the Buddhadharma**

The first and third vows of Venerable Fang Lian were clearly stated as: to propagate the Buddhadharma and to promote Buddhist education. They were the only reasons that kickstarted the formation of the Phor Tay schools. During the early years of the development of these Bodhi schools, the people actively involved were the Dharma preachers, devotees of Buddhism and admirers of the Buddha. They were all working towards a common goal: to make the establishment

of the Buddhist schools a reality. However in later years, things became quite different. As the buildings of Phor Tay were getting old, weathered and worn out, so did the Buddhist spirit of the people. The Sangha members were moving out of the schools, but teachers who had little or no knowledge of Buddhism were moving in. After the acceptance of the offer to receive subsidies from the Malayan government, the new national type primary school as well as the secondary school were not allowed to recruit their own staff any more. New teachers and headmasters were sent by the education department to work in the schools and not employed by the schools themselves. Many of these new employees were not Buddhists but followers of other religions. The private high school and kindergarten also faced similar problem. Although they could still select and employ the people they like, there was shortage of trained Buddhist teachers. The schools were losing their Buddhist identity day by day. The original Buddhist schools were becoming more and more secular than religious. The true teaching of the Buddha became obscure and Phor Tay schools became only superficially Buddhist. Most recent school leavers from the Bodhi schools admitted that they knew very little about Buddhism and many of them did not think that they were Buddhists.

## **Rebirth of the Bodhi Schools**

Among all the members of the Board of Directors of Phor Tay schools, Chen Huo Yan (拿督斯里陈火炎) was the one worth to be mentioned here. Chen Huo Yan had started to support and serve the Bodhi schools since 1946. It was a long period of sixty two years until he passed away in 2008. It was during his time as the chairman of the Board of Directors that the plan of shifting Phor Tay National Type Secondary School from Jalan Bagan Jermal to Sungai Dua was put into action. After moving into the new school building, the population of the students of Phor Tay National Type Secondary School steadily increased from a number less than one thousand to nearly three thousands in just a few years. Another important thing done by Chen Huo Yan was to invite the abbot of Than Hsiang Temple, Venerable Wei Wu (唯悟法师) to be his successor. This act actually brought the Sangha member back into Phor Tay, not as the Dharma master or teacher, but as the Chairman of the Board of Directors of the four Bodhi schools. Starting from 2008, under the leadership of Venerable Wei Wu, the Buddhist classes were restructured and new content was introduced. Sangha members were also invited to teach Buddhism together with lay Buddhists as volunteer teachers. Buddhist rituals and ceremonies were also brought back into the schools. Ten Good Deeds - the simplified form of Dharma practice was implemented in all four schools and also the kindergartens of Than Hsiang Temple. The Bodhi schools are now slowly and steadily moving back to the right path exemplified by the Buddha.



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